

In the Claims:

1 1. (Currently amended) A system for deployment in space
2 comprising:

3 a free-flying platform equipped and adapted to carry
4 out one or more utility functions in space; ~~[[and]]~~

5 a servicing and inspection apparatus including a
6 container that defines therein a chamber dimensioned and
7 configured to receive said platform and that has an opening
8 through which said platform may pass into and out of said
9 chamber, a door movably connected to said container so as
10 to be movable between a closed position in which said door
11 closes said opening and an open position in which said door
12 opens said opening, ~~[[and]]~~ a closing mechanism connected
13 to said door and adapted to selectively move said door to
14 said closed position so as to retain and secure said
15 platform in said chamber in said ~~container.~~ container, and
16 at least one light beam device that is arranged in said
17 container and that is connected for signal transmission so
18 as to trigger an operation of said closing mechanism when
19 said free-flying platform passes into a path of a light
20 beam emitted by said light beam device, wherein said
21 closing mechanism includes a motor arranged to drive said
22 closing mechanism so as to selectively move said door
23 between said open position and said closed position.

- 1 2. (Original) The system according to claim 1, wherein said
2 free-flying platform has a substantially spherical outer
3 configuration.
- 1 3. (Original) The system according to claim 2, wherein said
2 free-flying platform has no outward protrusions or
3 projections extending outwardly beyond said substantially
4 spherical outer configuration.
- 1 4. (Original) The system according to claim 2, wherein said
2 free-flying platform has a soft resilient outer skin
3 forming said substantially spherical outer configuration.
- 1 5. (Original) The system according to claim 1, wherein said
2 free-flying platform is equipped with a battery, a fuel
3 tank, maneuvering thrusters, on-board electronics, a
4 communication transmitter and receiver, and at least one
5 item selected from the group consisting of mission-specific
6 instrumentation, a camera, a sensor, and a tool.
- 1 6. (Original) The system according to claim 1, further
2 comprising a space vehicle or a space station, wherein said
3 servicing and inspection apparatus is mounted on an outside
4 of said space vehicle or said space station.
- 1 7. (Original) The system according to claim 6, further
2 comprising a monitoring and control station that is
3 arranged inside said space vehicle or said space station

4 and that includes monitoring, control and communication
5 electronics enabling an astronaut in said space vehicle or
6 said space station to monitor, control and communicate with
7 said free-flying platform outside of said space vehicle or
8 said space station.

Claims 8 and 9 (Canceled).

1 10. (Currently amended) The system according to ~~claim 9,~~
2 claim 1, wherein said apparatus further comprises at least
3 one of a positioning mark and a reflector arranged on an
4 inner side of said door or on an inner upper rim of said
5 container around said opening, and cooperating with said
6 light beam emitted by said light beam device.

1 11. (Original) The system according to claim 1, wherein said
2 apparatus further comprises a light emitting diode arranged
3 on an inner side of said door or on an inner upper rim of
4 said container and adapted to be used to detect a position
5 of said free-flying platform.

1 12. (Original) The system according to claim 1, wherein said
2 container includes sloping inner walls that taper inwardly
3 away from said opening and bound said chamber to have a
4 tapering funnel-shape.

1 13. (Original) The system according to claim 1, wherein said
2 apparatus further comprises a camera arranged in said
3 container.

1 14. (Original) The system according to claim 1, wherein said
2 apparatus further comprises a photoelectric switch that is
3 adapted to detect a position of said free-flying platform
4 and is arranged in said container.

1 15. (Original) The system according to claim 1, wherein said
2 apparatus further comprises a cushion that is arranged on
3 an inner side of said door and that is configured,
4 dimensioned and positioned to press against and fixedly
5 hold said free-flying platform in a docked position in said
6 chamber when said door is in said closed position, and said
7 apparatus further comprises a docking cradle that is
8 arranged in said container on a side of said chamber
9 opposite said opening and that is configured, dimensioned
10 and positioned to receive and fixedly hold said free-flying
11 platform in said docked position.

1 16. (Original) The system according to claim 1, wherein said
2 free-flying platform is equipped with a battery, and
3 wherein said apparatus further comprises an electrical
4 power source and at least one of an electrical contact and
5 an inductive coupling connected to said power source and
6 arranged and adapted to supply electrical power to said

7 free-flying platform in said chamber so as to re-charge
8 said battery of said free-flying platform.

1 17. (Original) The system according to claim 1, wherein said
2 free-flying platform is equipped with on-board electronics
3 and electrical connector contacts connected to said
4 electronics, and wherein said apparatus further comprises
5 electrical connector contacts adapted and arranged to mate
6 with said electrical connector contacts of said free-flying
7 platform when said free-flying platform is in a docked
8 position in said chamber.

1 18. (Original) The system according to claim 1, wherein said
2 free-flying platform is equipped with a fuel tank and a
3 fuel filling connection connected thereto, and said
4 apparatus further comprises a refueling connection arranged
5 and adapted to connect to said fuel filling connection when
6 said free-flying platform is in a docked position in said
7 chamber.

1 19. (Currently amended) A system for deployment in space
2 comprising:
3 a space vehicle or a space station;
4 a free-flying platform equipped and adapted to carry
5 out one or more utility functions in space, wherein said
6 free-flying platform is equipped with a battery, a fuel
7 tank, maneuvering thrusters, on-board electronics, a
8 communication transmitter and receiver, and at least one

9 item selected from the group consisting of mission-specific
10 instrumentation, a camera, a sensor, and a tool, and
11 wherein said free-flying platform has a substantially
12 spherical outer configuration;

13 a servicing and inspection apparatus mounted on an
14 outside of said space vehicle or said space station and
15 including a container that defines therein a chamber
16 dimensioned and configured to receive said platform and
17 that has an opening through which said platform may pass
18 into and out of said chamber, a door movably connected to
19 said container so as to be movable between a closed
20 position in which said door closes said opening and an open
21 position in which said door opens said opening, ~~[[and]]~~ a
22 closing mechanism connected to said door and adapted to
23 selectively move said door to said closed position so as to
24 retain and secure said platform in said chamber in said
25 ~~container;~~ container, and at least one light beam device
26 that is arranged in said container and that is connected
27 for signal transmission so as to trigger an operation of
28 said closing mechanism when said free-flying platform
29 passes into a path of a light beam emitted by said light
30 beam device, wherein said closing mechanism includes a
31 motor arranged to drive said closing mechanism so as to
32 selectively move said door between said open position and
33 said closed position; and

34 a monitoring and control station that is arranged
35 inside said space vehicle or said space station and that
36 includes monitoring, control and communication electronics

37 enabling an astronaut in said space vehicle or said space
38 station to monitor, control and communicate with said
39 free-flying platform outside of said space vehicle or said
40 space station.

1 20. (Original) A method of using the system according to claim
2 19, comprising the steps of:

3 a) launching said space vehicle or said space station
4 from earth into an orbit in space, while keeping said
5 free-flying platform secured in said chamber of said
6 servicing and inspection apparatus with said door in
7 said closed position;

8 b) in said orbit, moving said door from said closed
9 position to said open position and releasing said
10 free-flying platform from said chamber;

11 c) after said step b), flying said free-flying platform
12 in space outside of said space vehicle or said space
13 station and performing said one or more utility
14 functions using said at least one item selected from
15 the group consisting of said mission-specific
16 instrumentation, said camera, said sensor, and said
17 tool, under control of said astronaut via said
18 monitoring and control station inside said space
19 vehicle or said space station;

20 d) after said step c), returning said free-flying
21 platform into said chamber of said servicing and
22 inspection apparatus, and then moving said door from
23 said open position to said closed position; and

24 e) after said step d), servicing said free-flying
25 platform in said chamber by at least one of recharging
26 said battery and refueling said fuel tank.

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- 9 -